

58.

CHARACTER:

A

DISCOURSE TO YOUNG MEN.

DELIVERED IN

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BY

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PROVERBS XXII : 1.

“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches.”

By “a good name,” we understand the inspired writer to mean not so much a high estimate among men as the *substantial basis* of that estimate, — not so much reputation as character.

We can change the phrase of our text while we retain its spirit in the proposition—CHARACTER, THE MOST VALUABLE OF POSSESSIONS.

Look a moment at a young man as he goes forth to try the world for himself. He is about to choose among its proffered gifts, and the choice he now makes will very probably be his choice for life. He is full of vigor, full of animation, full of hope: all the springs of life in him are high: the world seems bright, clamors for his attention, presents a field for the employment of every faculty, and offers him all it has, — all its prizes, — occupation, riches, pleasure, a home, reputation, knowledge, companions, station ;

and he must select for himself. What is the best thing he can take? He must place some one treasure above the rest, for there will come many an emergency when his preferences cannot be concealed. Let him choose before any thing else that which is "rather to be chosen than great riches," which is better than pleasure, and higher than station, that which he can get in spite of every misfortune — nay, which may be secured quite as well through misfortune as it could in uninterrupted prosperity — *a true and noble Character.*

We dwell on three principal points — What is character: what is the peculiar need of it: and how to obtain it.

I. *What is it? What are some of the elements of true Character?*

1. We must set aside, in the outset, the idea that it is found in any of the trappings or mere circumstances of a person. It is not *his* but he *himself*. It is not anything extraneous, as wealth, for he may heir millions and be bankrupt in character; or station, for we have too plain demonstration of it to make it necessary to prove that official place and elevated character often are not even on speaking terms with each other; or the number and position of one's friends, though they may for a time hold up

those who cannot stand of themselves. Character is not any appendage nor on the outside, but is internal, is the substance, is the intellectual and moral life, is *the man*, and not his accidents.

2. Again, we are to discriminate that character is not one part of an individual disconnected from the rest of him; not a single act; not a series of acts viewed alone, — but it is the summing up and general effect of the whole.

3. And character, in the sense in which we are now using it, includes the additional idea of *good* character, of qualities which are esteemed and respected: and still, in addition, that these qualities are strongly marked and carry with them an energy and force commensurate with their other excellence.

The man of character then is he who has qualities by which he can be distinguished; they are good qualities; and he has them thoroughly and decidedly developed. It is opposed therefore to that depravity which permits one to be without any settled principle; and equally opposed to that infirmity of disposition which permits him to be drawn hither or thither by whatever influence chances to be nearest or to act upon him last. It is that attempering of qualities which compels respect and constitutes the reliable basis of right endeavor. It is the whole being guided into permanent, right, energetic activ-

ity. And this it is which may properly be pronounced more valuable than any other possession.

II. Now let us turn to some *Reasons why the Young Men of our land have peculiar need of such Character.*

It would be required by any individual, but especially by those who are in their youth-time, because they are now in the process of laying the foundations of their whole life and of their immortality. Still more is it needed by young *men* because they are thrust forth into the very turmoil of life; they are urged out far away from the quietness of the shore, or even the unruffled waters of the harbor — out — where the heaviest billows roll, and where they must have some steady compass. And if needed by young men any where, peculiarly by young men *in this country*, where every thing is in formation; where there is all the opportunity, and all the temptation too of our new, and diversified, and mingled people; here where all extremes are meeting and we are in the seething cauldron of such destinies as have never been wrought out by any people beneath the sun. To particularize in only two examples.

1. Our Young Men need Character, the most decided and correct, *because of their frequent changes of residence and the responsibilities devolving on them in those changes.* I refer to that restless activity

which is a national trait, and which keeps our young men in almost perpetual motion. How few of the young men of this congregation were born here, and of those who were, how few are expecting to abide here and be buried in this soil. Multitudes of young men have come from elsewhere; numbers who originated here have already gone or are intending to go to some other part of the land. In these ceaseless migrations all that is local, all that is merely conventional, all that comes from the imitation simply of others' good habits—is removed. The formalities of usage, the restraints of old companionships and of the presence or proximity of elders and superiors are broken up. Yet such influences as these are the small anchors which hold many to their moorings, —and these are all. They do not recognize the fact that they have nothing more substantial until they are jostled out of their wonted position, and are left to float free according to their own affinities, and then find how easily, and how fast, and how far they drift away from the familiar and stable landmarks of good morals. They need some great anchor of character which, cabled with sound principle to unchanging Truth, will hold through any storm.

A young man comes from his moral home into the hurry and snares of a city business. His tempters

are new, his opportunities new, his stimulus new ; it will not be strange if his vices become new — if his appearance and his habits change. With a foolish pride he discards his early carefulness ; he calls it timidity ; he calls it ignorance of the world ; he calls it lack of spirit ! With a sad folly he allows himself to become the slave of his appetites ; he wears off the modest hues of his home and of his education ; he grows hard in his look ; he knows the best saloons ; he swaggers and riots and loses his place ! They call him a “fast” young man — and he is “fast” learning to ruin himself. Perhaps he goes to seek his fortune in some opening settlement of the illimitable west. All things are new. Stable customs ; social institutions ; religious culture have not kept pace with the frenzy of enterprise. Now he shows himself *as he is*. Hitherto he has thought himself discreet and respectable. He has every facility of opportunity and little external restraint. What he wants is not knowledge, not merely decent habits, not merely anxious friends, but he wants *Personal Character*. He wants sound principle. He wants something to go with him and to make him a law unto himself in the midst of an eager, heterogeneous, reckless population, and thro’ all the excitements of his distant, and lonely, and dangerous career. He wants not merely a Bible in his trunk, and the memory of his early instructions,

and a store of good advice—but he wants personal character as solid as the foundations of his being, and possessing a power of locomotion and of adhesiveness which shall enable it to keep up with him, however swiftly he moves, and to abide by him wherever he goes—so that he who seemed a good man here, shall *be* a good man when he gives his name to a new township on the prairie, or when he looks for gold along the shores of the Pacific.

Our young men need true character emphatically, because of those extraordinary responsibilities which rest upon them in laying as they do the foundations of villages, cities, states, empires. They travel far away to better their own temporal fortune, or perhaps only to expend the energy which they feel bounding through them. But in the efforts they make to advance their own fortune, is bound up the character of a great territory just opening, it may be, to a boundless population, and the well-being, therefore, of uncounted thousands. What institutions shall be established; what customs and influences shall become traditionary there and be received with all the veneration of a precedent from the founders of the state—these are the questions which they are unconsciously answering, even in the common habits of their private life. To be convinced of this we have but to reflect on the permanent and

incalculable effect which they produce who are the earliest founders of the little hamlet that is to grow into the Chicago, or New York, or the San Francisco of a great territory ; or to gather an illustration of similar facts in the history, only half a century old, of this city in which we are assembled.

And all this is responsibility to which any of our young men may be called. The little settlement which they commence this year, or of which they become a part, may be — we cannot tell what — half a century hence ! The dead bodies of men are occasionally found turned into stone in certain soils where they have been covered up — but our youth are perpetuating not the features of their faces and the shape of their forms, but are sending down themselves to the generations to come in the indestructible rock of their own character impressed on the now pliant institutions amidst which they live.

2. But, again, *our young men need Character in view of the present and coming crises of the country.* We are evidently living at a time when all who have any share in public affairs must be ready to stand by principles. It is a time when no deceitful prognostics warn of the approach of such decisions in our national history as will call for whatever firmness and manliness and courage, even youth, which is said to admire those qualities most, can conceive.

It was a great result to begin a free Christian empire on these shores. It may yet prove a greater task to cement and preserve and transmit the work which has been wrought. If this splendid edifice of a free Christian state be daubed with too much untempered mortar, it must crumble to pieces. If our population is determined to forget God, and not to regard the operation of his hands, He will forsake us. Even the most enlightened, the most free, the most Christian republic on the globe, cannot endure every thing. If it shall come to be understood that *savage ferocity* is to take the place of intelligent argument, ; if it is ever to be permitted that they who cannot answer reasoning may crush their opponents with brute muscle ; if the highest places of civil dignity are to be polluted with the physical violence of the coward and the bully ; if the greatest questions of civilization are to be settled by pillage and slaughter, and the perpetrators of such crimes, not only against those who now live, but of such crimes against millions yet unborn, of such crimes against the very name of civil liberty, the perpetrators of such crimes against humanity itself, are to escape with impunity, then indeed is the time of our destruction — of our *deserved* destruction as a people — nigh at hand ! Then indeed are we too unworthy of what has been given to us, and it had better be taken away and we be wiped out from the map of the nations.

On the young men of a land which has such a question to decide, responsibilities rest too great to be described. And they are not responsibilities which political intelligence, or political sagacity, or the deepest interest in the administration of affairs can determine. They are questions which have their basis in principles and to which nothing, nothing, is adequate except that reliable, substantial, *Character* which shall study the right, and having learned the right, shall dare to maintain it, or die!

Character, personal Character, is the demand which our country makes of her young men; and not the country only, but all the interests of freedom and of man that have been committed to our hands, call aloud for the same support.

The young men are to be the legislators of the country. There they will need nothing so much as Character. They are to choose those who will legislate, and therefore they will have such laws as they shall themselves select. They are to give name and repute to the land that gave them birth; that name will be what they make it. And they are to be of the number who shall avert from their guilty country the just judgments of offended Heaven—if indeed those judgments are to be turned away. Alike then in respect to personal and to national affairs, it is the great want that our young men should possess indi-

vidual character — something within themselves that can neither be awed by despotism nor besotted by temptation; something which, while it shall not be too self-important, shall not cower before danger; character, competent to form its own opinions, and ready to act according to its sincere judgments; not afraid to differ even from those whom it respects; governed by something far higher than its own impulses; acknowledging its responsibilities, imploring divine light, confessing its weakness; but which shall firmly, calmly, continuously, walk in the paths of the Right. Such a character is “rather to be chosen than great riches.”

III. It remains to ask *How shall such a Character be secured?* The answer to this question is important in proportion to the value and necessity of the attainment to be made; and the sole answer which the truth allows is that *The only trust-worthy basis of Character is true religion.* That which is constructed on other foundation may endure for a time; it may sustain itself through some trying scenes; it may successfully meet some temptations—but we can really depend upon nothing less than the regenerating power and grace of God. It must be *true* religion, not any thing spurious, not any affectation or counterfeit of religion. It must be that which is a principle in secret as well as openly; that which does not shift in the breath of popular opinion, but has its

life within itself drawn from unseen and immortal fountains, as saith the Saviour, "The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

1. *For it is Religion that reaches the internal life.* That goes to the deep places of the soul. It affects directly and profoundly the springs of moral vitality. It is an interior force urging its way outward—a volcanic fire which has been kindling and glowing within before it gives exterior manifestations of its presence.

2. Then again it is Religion only which acts upon the *whole man* and *moulds all the powers*. Other energies may be signally efficacious on certain portions, but this asserts its supremacy every where. It subordinates the intellect, the affections, the will, the heart, and the life.

3. And once more, it is Religion which *changes the governing principle* from an inferior and selfish end to one high aim. It enters into the plans and counsels of the mind and into the desires of the heart, and remodels them all; and these are the very materials out of which character is formed; so that from the nature of religion and of character, the one appears as the only sound basis of the other.

The same truth is illustrated not only from the

nature of religion but also from the history of those who have exhibited the noblest character. The truly grand and heroic in character has sprung out of the truest devotion to God. Those who in the Scriptures stand out as the models of character, are also the models of piety. The founders of the highest Christian civilization on this continent, were men of character the most decided, in many respects the most noble. They prayed to God with a faith that rebukes, they abandoned all worldly prospects with a fortitude that astonishes, they attempted apparent impossibilities with a courage that awes us; and they became founders of exalted states and fathers of civil and religious freedom because they first received in their souls the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

The young men of to-day must have character built upon personal religion if they obtain any which is to be worth the name. We are already in a crisis of our history as a nation, where no cheap advice to violent speech or violent action will avail. It may yet be necessary for us to sacrifice more than we imagine. The glorious boon of such freedom as we have been enjoying, may yet have to be re-purchased by such perils and such deeds as our generation has not known. We cannot be prepared for that which awaits us except by putting on the whole armor of God. We cannot know whither He would lead ex-

cept by habitual and fervent prayer to Him to teach. We cannot disperse the evils that oppress our country by waving over them any slender wand of worldly sagacity, or muttering among them any charms of mere political necromancy. "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."

In his business, in his political acts, in his social influences, in his family relations, in his moral choices, in his religious belief and action, in all his ordering of the present short life, in all his inevitable preparation for the life to come; every young man among us, resident or stranger, whether still within the fold of his own home or already thrown forth alone to try the chances of existence, needs nothing so much as that personal character, the foundation of all right conduct, which comes from the renewing grace of God and which is true religion received into the heart and presiding over all the life.

Let no one sit down content with a knowledge of the want or a confession of the only source of supply. Let him rather take the gift of God which is eternal life. Let him receive into himself the Lord Jesus Christ as his Prophet, Priest and King; as his Governor, Guide and Friend: so shall he find a good name that is indeed rather to be chosen than great riches; when Christ shall say "I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my father, and before his angels. Amen.